

Adult Development and Female Artists: Focus on the Ballet World

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Abstract

While we have made significant strides in the study of male adult development, we have only just begun to question the applicability of the foundational works in relation to women. We know even less about developmental theory as it describes the experience of the performing artist. While several theorists through life history and psychobiography have intensively explored visual and literary artists, there is in fact a paucity of literature on performing artists.

Using an adult development model that has focused on male development, we have created notions about the salience of work in achieving satisfaction in life. Current research on women has challenged this notion with the point of view that relationships continue to dominate the female preoccupation. How are artists like or unlike these male models of development? Do the emerging views of the adult development of women also embrace the experience of female performing artists?

This paper reviews adult development theory and the contemporary concerns about generalizing across gender lines. The paper goes on to identify developmental issues for women in professional ballet. It concludes with a call for research and states the need for the intensive case study, life history, and longitudinal research. Critical research questions are raised that focus on the creative individual accounting for genetic inheritance, early development, the normal process of the life, and involvement in an art world.

Carl Jung observed, "To discuss the problems connected with the stages of human development is an exacting task, for it means nothing less than unfolding a picture of psychic life in its entirety from the cradle to the grave."¹ This paper reviews several significant theories of adult development, focusing specifically on developmental issues for women. These issues are considered in an attempt to understand the dilemmas of women artists in the ballet world and their efforts to create a satisfying life while creating art. In particular, developmental issues for women artists in the young adult period are discussed. This paper concludes with a call for research that grounds our under-

standing of the life experience of the woman artist in an adult development perspective.

The artist's growth and development can be filled with pain, emotional upheaval, and isolation while the artist maintains a public face of productivity. Gelsey Kirkland's escape into drugs is but one celebrated example.² In the ballet world, a young dancer struggles with adolescence while making important career and life decisions at around age 17. More startling is the realization that her career will end usually before the age of 35. Two important questions arise: in what ways are dancers on-time developmentally, and what are the emotional costs for delaying psychological tasks that can't be realized within the confines of the ballet world?

We know very little about the applicability of current developmental theory in relation to the performing artist. While some attention has been paid to the unique problems of the prodigy, little work has focused on creativity over the course of life, or the successful realization of developmental tasks toward psychic wholeness. The study of the performing artist's life must also be grounded in a social systems perspective that accounts for the impact of the art world. Art worlds, like that of ballet, are more than a backdrop for the creative life; they are also powerful shapers of experience through internalized norms and belief systems. This study deals with the individual psyche emerging over the course of life, in the context of the social systems and organizations that mediate the process.

Adult Development Theories

Adult development theory owes much to the writings of Carl Jung. Jung wrote a great deal about the psychological tasks of adulthood and the stages of life. He spoke of the individuation process imminent in everyone, and that culminates in rounding out the individual into a psychic whole.

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His conception takes account not only of the conscious, but also of the unconscious components of the psyche, in their delicately balanced and creative interaction with the conscious mind.³

Jung identified the need to integrate aspects of the self that have emerged during the process of individuation. He contributed some of the first thoughts on midlife. Jacobi effectively captures Jung's perspective:

Often the transition from the first to the second half of life is accompanied by. . . disturbances and serious upheavals. Divorce, change of profession, change of residence, financial losses, physical or psychic illnesses of all kinds characterize the readjustment or forcibly bring it about. Naturally, a great deal depends on one's situation and on whether one is prepared in advance for the coming change. The less mature a person is when he reaches the change of life, the more powerfully the upheaval will affect him, provided of course that the change set in at all and he does not remain stuck in an infantile or pubescent state; this can lead to a smoldering, chronic neurosis. There are indeed people—and perhaps they are in the majority—who slip into the second half of life slowly, almost unnoticeably. But they seldom attain the same broad maturity of personality as those who have to begin life's afternoon with much toil and suffering, and are thereby driven to intensive reckoning between the ego and the unconscious components of the psyche.⁴

Erikson was another early contributor to psychosocial theory, which he elaborated in terms of five central concepts: (1) stages of development, (2) developmental tasks, (3) psychosocial crises, (4) resolving crises, and (5) coping mechanisms. Erikson's psychosocial theory, based in part on clinical study, describes eight sequential stages of development from childhood into adulthood.⁵

Erikson proposes an "epigenetic" principle of development. This principle states that development is influenced by the resolution in the proper sequence of each developmental crisis and that each task exists in a predevelopmental form before its critical developmental period arises. The last three stages, Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generativity vs. Stagnation, and Ego Integrity vs. Despair, encompass adulthood. Contemporary work in adult development has been devoted to elaborating these last three stages.⁶

Jung and Erikson's pioneer work is reflected in the thinking of both Levinson and Gould. As the body of literature has grown, two generalized types of developmental theory have emerged. These theories can be categorized by two views: (1) the process of developmental change through the accomplishment of tasks or phases; or (2) age-related sequences or stages of development.

Gould, in the psychoanalytic tradition, connects the separation anxiety that characterizes childhood with the transformational tasks of adulthood. He presents a model of psychodynamic change that involves resolving false assumptions carried from infancy, while adapting to the changing sense of time that characterizes each epoch of the adult life cycle.⁷ Adults are responsible for their own transformation. Gould states:

"In order to grow we have to discover we were wrong about something we took for granted or modify some rule or regulation we imposed upon ourselves too rigidly. These ideas are sometimes the values we were taught as children, or stereotypes reinforced by a particular subculture, or impressions from childhood transmuted into commandments by an immature mind. They all add up to what life is supposed to be. They are sturdy structures that resist the wear of contradictory experience because, like any habit, we feel safe when living within them and feel endangered and awkward when modifying them—just like learning a new tennis stroke."⁸

Levinson's early work has come under harsh criticism for gender parochialism and rigid, age-graded sequences of development. Nonetheless, his work has made a profound impact on adult developmental theory, and constitutes a significant methodologic contribution in the systematic analysis of life history interview material. His early work is based on in-depth biographical studies of 40 male subjects.

Levinson's theory explores the concepts of a life course evolving and taking shape within the life cycle with its seasons and transitions. Another vital component in the theory are the life structures, which are constructed and torn down and re-constructed during the life course.

Research on the life course must include all aspects of living: inner wishes and fantasies; love relationships; participation in family, work, and other social systems; bodily changes; good times and bad—everything that has significance in a life. To study the life course, it is necessary first to look at a life in all its complexity at a given time, to include all its components and their interweaving into a partially integrated pattern. Second, one must delineate the evolution of this pattern over time. . . . Every discipline has split the life course into disparate segments, such as childhood or old age. Research has been done from such diverse perspectives as biological aging, moral development, career development, adult socialization, enculturation, and adaptation to loss or stress, with minimal recognition of their interconnections. The resulting fragmentation is so great that no discipline or viewpoint conveys the sense of an individual's life and its temporal course.⁹

Levinson divides the life course into sequences of development. At the macro level are the eras: Pre Adulthood, Early Adulthood, Middle Adulthood, and Late Adulthood. Within the eras are the developmental periods which are bordered on either side by transitions. In order they are:

Early Adult Transition, age 17–22
Entry Life Structure for Early Adulthood, age 22–28
Age 30 Transition, age 28–33
Culminating Life Structure for Early Adulthood, age 33–40
Midlife Transition, age 40–45
Entry Life Structure for Middle Adulthood, age 45–50
Age 50 Transition, age 50–55
Culminating Life Structure for Middle Adulthood, age 55–60
Late Adult Transition, age 60–65

The "novice phase" of adulthood, age 17–33, presents several critical developmental tasks. The tasks are (1) formation of the dream that plays an important role in emerging life structure, (2) forming mentor relationships that will advance the dream, (3) forming an occupational identity, and (4) forming relationships with the special man or woman, usually leading to marriage and a family. These tasks have been scrutinized by other theorists who have questioned their direct applicability to the lives of women.

Bardwick, for example, states that Levinson's model is appropriate for both sexes in that it is an accurate description of what happens when we experience aging or when we evaluate our accomplishments. She does raise concerns about gender differences that should be considered in the model. For example: three out of the four early developmental tasks of the novice phase involve work. Bardwick questions whether work truly exemplifies and influences women's values or whether it fulfills or frustrates core aspects of their being. She theorizes that women's dreams are more relational than men's, and can be less formed because they are so enmeshed in the life of someone else.¹⁰

This view is shared by Roberts and Newton in their review of four unpublished doctoral dissertations that present a Levinsonian view of women's adult development. "Unlike the men in Levinson's study, only a small percentage of the 39 women reported dreams in which occupation stood as the primary component. Women's dreams contained an image of self-in-adult-world defined in relation to others, such as husbands, children, and colleagues".¹¹

Giele argues that theories about women currently cover moral development or work and family roles, but that what is needed is a truer sketch of intellectual and emotional development as well as an examination of some of the areas where women have excelled.¹² Gilligan theorizes that women's identities emerge through relationships of intimacy and care, and explores the unique moral problems that are posed. She considers women's career patterns through sequences of relationships and attachments, and raises questions about the role of master teacher or mentor.¹³

Adult Development and the Woman Artist

While we have made significant strides in the study of the adult development of men, we have only just begun to question the applicability of the foundational studies in relation to women. We know even less about developmental theory as it describes the experience of the performing artist. While several theorists have intensively explored personality through life history and psychobiography (primarily of visual and literary artists), there is in fact a paucity of literature on performing artist's.

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male models of development? Do the emerging views of the adult development of women also embrace the experience of women performing artists? The following discussion will be organized around issues of Young Adulthood and entry into the art world of ballet, concluding with the Age 30 Transition and the approach of Midlife. The anecdotal references are taken from years of participant observation and field study in the ethnographic tradition of descriptive research.

Young Adulthood

The transition from late adolescence to young adulthood presents several developmental tasks that reveal gender differences. One of the key struggles for the young woman is the beginning of psychological separation from mother and establishing a clearer picture of her gender identity as her own woman. Emerging sexuality and body consciousness are part of this struggle. For the novice dancer, this process can be jeopardized significantly by mother's continued role in early career training. Hundreds of mothers relocate to housing in New York, leaving husband and family behind, to nurture the aspiring ballerina's career. This model supports enmeshment, not differentiation.

Also at this critical time, the late adolescent is confronted with a population of developmentally arrested women, both physically and emotionally, that will form her primary peer group. Maintaining a low percent of body fat, these dancers will remain in a physical maturation limbo. In addition, the adolescent ballerina must struggle against a false sense of autonomy in pursuing her career and her initiation into an art world that demands compliance and passivity.

A great deal has been written about the power of the peer group and the process of identification during this developmental period. This task is further complicated for the novice, for while she yearns to be liked and admired by her peers, she is simultaneously confronted by her rivals for coveted attention in class and on the stage. This conflict will become a central organizer of her experience.

It is during this time that the issue of dependency becomes increasingly powerful intrapsychically. Along with the separation from mother, the young woman often looks for the object upon which to shift her attachment. The adolescent strivings for independence and autonomy are often overshadowed by the wish to be taken care of and protected. This wish can be associated with fantasy beliefs that "I will be taken care of if I am special". In this respect the ballet world can provide an environment that is maladaptive. The ballet world supports dependency, not strivings for autonomy. It is also a world that supports the forming of attachments to powerful men which maintain the fantasy belief systems.

Traditionally women have used marriage as a vehicle to separate from the family of origin. Today, young women have more options in the form of career opportunities and education, but the developmental task of separating remains. The dance world provides another family system waiting to accept the young adult from her family of origin.

Another feature of the early adult years is the need to identify with ego ideals and role models. It is a time for rebelling against parental standards and values and associating oneself with causes and crusades. What loftier crusade than to become a standard bearer for the ultimate in physical achievement: ballet. The ballet world, however, presents a mixed array of role models, often assaulting self-esteem and further eroding the differentiation of one's performance from the self.

There is a great debate as to the nature of the formation of the dream, in Levinsonian terms, for women. Bardwick argues that the dream for women is less formed and more diffuse.¹⁴ During field study research, many of the young dancers described the wish "to be a dancer," "to be someone special". There is an implied transformation from one state of being to another. Unlike their male counterparts, for women, this is not a dream that is formed primarily around work but rather around an image of oneself, where it is truly difficult to separate the dancer from the dance. While the women hope that the art will transform them, their images of the future and their role in it is vague and largely unformed.

Other researchers theorize that women have split or divided dreams that combine attachment needs as well as the career needs. How are these conflicting needs fulfilled by the professional dancer? Scrutiny of the dancer's lifestyle reveals the difficulty in forming relationships outside of the dance world, with the potential for relationships within that world equally bleak. Touring and the demands of performance can place relationships under enormous stress. Some dancers have expressed that teachers or directors warned against "becoming involved". Several women stated that having a boyfriend was experienced as being disloyal or not being truly dedicated to their art. Others complained about the limited number of available partners.

Women in many other professions have struggled against belief systems in organizational life that view childbearing or marriage as an indication of lack of professional commitment or ambition. This not an experience shared by men.

The developmental period of young adulthood is an important building phase in which many life structures are established that will be modified over the course of life. For the professional dancer, the pressure for a singularity of

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focus on dancing renders these life structures incomplete, unstable, and time-limited. The hallmark of adult development is the integration of aspects of the self that emerge while building life structures based on self-knowledge gained from introspection. What are the opportunities for this kind of psychological growth in an environment that discourages exploring new aspects of the self? Many dancers behave as if greater self-knowledge is a threat to their ability to remain in the dance world. Boyce states:

It is essential to a woman's well-being that she become intentionally aware of the choices she has made, the role she has accepted, and how these express various facets of herself. The number of women who are successful achievers without gaining their life satisfaction in that arena represents another developmental difference between women and men.¹⁵

Dancers are forced prematurely to make life decisions that shape life structures. These young adults struggle with the press of many difficult choices without support systems to evaluate alternatives. Toni Bentley poignantly captures the experience:

I'm truly sad today. I'm twenty-two, and feel that my career is at a standstill. For eleven or twelve years it had moved forward, and now it is stagnating and going nowhere. What can I feel but some sort of ending? Twenty-two and my career, a big section of my life, feels over. I suppose I should be happy I am still young enough to begin again, but I've no money, no lover, no future I can see, only the same ballets, season after season. I am not alone. I'm sure forty other girls feel the same at times. But on we go day by day, rehearsing the same ballets.¹⁶

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This experience has been evidenced by many of the dancers interviewed. While some were pleased with the quality of their artistry, they were often intensely dissatisfied with their lives. In several instances the only hope for "normalcy" and the building of more satisfying life structures meant leaving the art world. This, however, is not in itself a solution. Dancing is often an important aspect of the core self. It is not a matter of leaving a job, but rather of leaving a life. The result is that for many of these young women, the experience is much like that of a wife, newly divorced, who had derived much of her identity from the relationship. There is a profound sense of loss, confusion, anger and in some cases denial. The behavior of the dancers closely resembled adults at midlife, seeking external solutions to internal problems. In reviewing the literature on women and careers, Galloway writes:

The researchers found scores of professional, successful women in the corporate ranks who reported frustration, emptiness, exhaustion disillusionment and a sense of personal failure when they realized the personal and interpersonal costs of their professional success. For these women, power, title, money and status were not enough. The women wanted fair treatment and compensation,

but almost more importantly, they wanted opportunities to be themselves at work and to be connected with people around them. Not finding this, the women made career shifts or turned to self-employment, and reassessed their career and life priorities. . . .¹⁷

Unlike these women, however, when dancers reassess their lives, they also confront the fear that they are not prepared for life outside of dance. It is the rare performer who has sufficient savings for this transition, or has formal training in any other endeavor, or who feels connected to a network of friends outside the dance world. Most do not have a spouse to rely on during this time. The result is that many dancers do not consciously prepare for the time when they will stop dancing. Others make precipitous changes in their lives, such as sudden marriages, pregnancies, or abrupt retirement from the profession. Many struggle with their worst injuries, which drive them out of performance. This process happens for many ballet dancers around age 30.

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The Age 30 Transition

The age 30 transition described in developmental literature is a period of assessment and evaluation. For many adult women, the preoccupation during this transition is on modifying the life structures that were established in the 20's. It is an effort to realize the missing aspects of the dream. Those who have stayed home to have children are longing to be back in the career world. Those who have had careers are longing for relationships and/or children. It remains to be answered whether this is also true for the woman artist.

Dancers deal with unique age-related pressures. Many desperately try to delay or postpone retiring from performing, often taking chances with their health in the process. The focus is sometimes on a surgical procedure to treat old injuries, to give the performer a few more years. When in this mind set, it is not possible for the performer to engage in the normal developmental tasks of this passage: assessing the dream and making changes before midlife.

The age 30 transition for women has also been associated with the ticking of the biological clock, urging them to attend to the passing of the reproductive years. This coming to grips with issues of childbearing once again puts the woman ballet dancer in conflict with the belief system of the art world. The dance world is organized around maintaining the image of youth. There is very little room for adult women, women that marry and bear children. This is only further complicated for the dancer by the body image concerns, including the issue of how long it will take to return to performing.

A Call for Research

The remainder of this paper focuses on establishing a research agenda for the future. It is evident that we lack

both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies that examine the lives of performing artists. There is a tremendous need for case study and other intensive life history methodologic treatments that explore current adult development theory in relation to the artist. The following are issues that should be covered.

What is the nature of the dream for the performing artist? Because success in the arts requires early preparation and training, the formation of a life dream in the arts does not fit our current theories of the evolution of the dream in adult development. Our understanding of the dream must account not only for gender differences but for the impact of the art in shaping the dream. Is making art analogous to other traditional occupations at the core of the male dream? Do women artists match this pattern or do they have a complementary dream that involves relationships? This brings into the question the role of attachment and its significance in the adult development of women. If women do choose a relationship along with making art, do they experience the same role conflicts so eloquently described in the literature on working women or dual-career couples? Is there a "superwoman" lifestyle statistically represented in the population of women artists as there is in the average population of working women, a lifestyle that attempts to "do it all," to "be there for everyone"?

Is the dream of making art more profound in the psychological development of the individual than the acquiring of an occupational identity? It appears that there is tremendous inner resistance to the modification of the dream of being an artist. Is this in part because of the belief system of the art world that has been internalized? We need to understand the interrelationship of the significance of being an artist as an early life structure and the sense of self in early identity formation as it is influenced within a family system and an art world.

Is the nature or formation of the dream different in the various arts? Mentors are identified in the literature as playing a central role in the development of the dream as well as in helping the novice through the early stages of organizational life. Do we really understand the power and meaning of the master teacher as mentor in the life of the young adult artist? How is the development of the dream for women artists affected by the limited number of role models and mentors? What images of life structures for women in the arts are being modeled? How many women artists are able to establish relationships with women master teachers? In the ballet world, for example, the majority of the master teachers are women, but the choreographers and artistic directors are men. The message is that women end their performing careers and become teachers, focusing on technique training, while men become increasingly creative and influential. Are the issues of dependency and immaturity as prevalent in the other arts as they are in ballet? Is this kind of developmental arrest somehow connected to the powerful figures that shape the art worlds?

If the process of adult development is one of seeking psychic wholeness through establishing appropriate life structures, moving through transitions, and integrating new aspects of the self, how do we assess the growth of the performing artist? At first glance the life structures appear to be rigid and inflexible. The emergence of new aspects of the self could present a threat to the stability of the core identity in relation to the dream of being an artist. Does the artist dare turn the gaze inward in the process of life appraisal that characterizes the major adult transitions?

What do we know about the artist at midlife? How does the artist manifest the important developmental tasks of midlife: letting go of the past, dealing with physical decline, integrating the counter sexual opposite, and the experience of death anxiety? Certainly our consideration of the artist must also account for the fear of loss of technique with age, the instability of the lifestyle, and financial insecurity. In most of the performing arts there are unique concerns that are grounded in the experience of the vulnerability of the body with which most midlife adults do not have to contend.

Beyond midlife, how do artists make the transition from performing to a new life structure? How is creativity affected by aging? Do women artists fear the potential loneliness of aging reported by other studies of women, due to loss of significant others, death of parents, etc., or does the art truly fill the life as a partner would?

Does success for women artists trigger gender identity anxiety as reported in many studies of women? Does the creative act touch the core identity of the woman artist unlike work? Do women artists consciously engage with the question of childbearing or does it happen as an unconscious resolution? Do women artists experience the same intense biological clock as reported in the age 30 literature on women? How does the mourning and loss of not having children manifest itself for the creative woman? Because many women do their most significant psychological work in separating from mother through childbearing, how do women artists that do not bear children engage in this complex task?

How is it that the performer's vitality on stage is not reflected in their vitality for life? How many successful artists are losing the battle of life in depression and despair, overwhelming anxiety, and restriction in the building of satisfying life structures? Why are so many women artists unable to break the hold of the dictates of the art organization in shaping a lifestyle and establishing healthy relationships?

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A research agenda for the 1990's must consider the individual artist as embedded within the art world if we are to build theory that truly furthers our understanding and therefore our ability to respond to the needs of the performing artist. We must assess the life of the performing artist in terms of the life structures created and the meaning of choices as constructed by the individual. We must analyze the ways in which self-transformation grows out of accomplishing the developmental tasks of the life course. We need to identify the marker events that are unique for performing artists as we attempt to map the life structures that govern their experience. Given the training, access to opportunities, and lifestyle implications of the various art forms, what aspects of the self must be repressed or developmentally delayed to participate in that art? Are there really "off time" developmental tasks that are more appropriate for a satisfying life in the arts? As we have discovered pitfalls in applying developmental theory generated by the study of men to the understanding of women, we should be equally careful in our efforts to explain the life course developments of the performing artist.

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